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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses current information technologies and their applications, both real and potential, in the field of public relations. It is argued that public relations are more important than ever in view of global events that challenge the world's ability to handle problems related to public trust and confidence, and the telecommunications technology used to report these events. It is noted that computer networks, databases, teleconferencing, and electronic mail are but a few of the new technologies currently available to developing nations and to international organizations in general for use in the access, exchange, and management of information. A case study of the Hill and Knowlton company--which consists of 60 offices around the world--is cited to demonstrate that organizational effectiveness is based on access to information on a 24-hour basis through the use of one or more information technologies. It is concluded that a globally-linked system in the future, using new telecommunications technologies, will cause a major shift in focus in the public relations field from corporate structure to an international structure. (13 references) (DB)

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APPLICATION OF THE NEW INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

by

Cecil Blake, Ph.D

This paper is a revised version (1991) of a presentation made at the Commonwealth Public Relations Conference, held at Abuja, Nigeria, September 24-26, 1990, organized by the International Public Relations Association in collaboration with the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations. Dr. Blake made the original presentation while with the faculty of the School of Communications, Howard University. He is currently a member of staff of the Information Sciences Division of the International Development Research Center, Nairobi, Kenya. (Regional Office for Eastern and Southern Africa)

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INTRODUCTION

As one century concludes its final phase and inhabitants of the global system prepare to move on to another century, the natural tendency is to look back, assess, plan and generate needed resources that would support new initiatives in a new "age". In several spheres of human activity, the final decade of a century gives rise to speculations as to what the future holds and what the past has taught mankind. In the process of assessing past achievements and failures, evaluations are conducted on the present state of affairs. For those of us living during the final phase of a century, we find ourselves in what one may call an "enviable" and albeit a "privileged" position in juxtaposition to those who lived neither at the beginning nor the ending of an epoch as huge and complex as a "century".

The end of the twentieth century is marked by phenomena not too comparable with other centuries in similar time. Besides the accelerated advances in science and technology, societies find themselves still struggling to handle issues ranging from governance to the survival of the fundamental global life support systems -- the environment, the geosphere and biosphere. At no other similar time in history was the global system (meaning the entire world system) made so small by the interaction of fantastic inventions and advances in science and technology.

As a result of the invention of satellites, we can cue into activities thousands of miles away instantly. This has no precedent. Telematics and informatics allow us to access resource realms that were hitherto non-existent in a packaged and stored form. Not only could the resource realms be accessed, bits of data could be retrieved, used, disseminated, recaptured and restored for further use or reference and/or refinement.

At the heart of all of these advances and cutting edge research and development is the crucial role information and communication technologies play in achieving success. So much is the influence of the advances in information technology and sciences that we are already calling the dusk of the twentieth century the information society. Information is the nervous centre of societal activities and the ability or inability to master the technologies in this field -- information technologies and science, determine to a significant extent the quality of life any given society can enjoy. Furthermore, failure to master the new information technologies results in absolute failure in attempts to participate in the global reformation taking place as a consequence of innovations related to the new technologies.

It is not my intention in this paper to do an assessment of a century approaching its end. In fact the rapid developments taking place in the fields of science, technology and human relations pre-empt any far-reaching conclusions that could be drawn from the multifarious activities of the twentieth century given the fact that we have ten more years to go. All one can say with a relatively fair degree of confidence is that the human race is at a watershed, and the manner in which we choose to apply the innovations that the twentieth century heralded will determine, to a significant extent, the quality of life of the next three generations. We can ill afford to be reckless with our judgements.

By the same token, the intention of this work is not to plan or prescribe means of generating needed resources that would support the great discoveries and innovations of the twentieth century, as we move towards a new time and age. My purpose is to present a discourse on the new information technologies and their applications, real and potential, in the field of public relations. To achieve the above objective, I will discuss the following key topics: the public

relations environment in our time; the new information technologies and challenges for public relations practice and theory; and applications in a public relations corporation.

Public Relations in Our Time

Why public relations in our time? The answer to the question is direct and simple: we no longer look askance at the profession of public relations. There is no longer a need for an apologia or a vindication. Public relations has long outgrown its press-agentry image and has asserted itself as a genuine management function. I stress "in our time" because the global crises that challenge our ability to handle problems related to public trust and confidence -- the current malaise in the Middle East as an example -- also brings to the forefront the important place public relations now occupies in the battle of words and visual images. With advances in satellite communication apparata, video and audio technologies, we no longer have to spend time reading the pros and cons of an issue, we can "see" the issues, visualized by these technologies. Public relations companies now invest heavily in broadcast PR as a means of making a client's case understandable and persuasive.

Interestingly Lesley (1976) observed that:

> Public relations is a phenomenon and a necessity in our times. It has been created by forces that increased the tempo of the world, casting people into many diversified groups, all seeking different objectives yet all having to work together toward common advantages and progress. The growing complexity of civilization has created problems undreamed of when social, economic, political and religious classifications were simple and distinct (p.3).

Even though stated in 1976, a long time in terms of the rapid advances and changes that are going on globally, Lesley's words are germane today, notwithstanding the developments in all fields related to public relations since then. All one needs to do is take a comprehensive look at the public relations

battle between the United States and Iraq, during the height of the "Gulf crisis" (Gulf crisis" January-February, 1991). Furthermore, Lesley's comments are relevant in our time particularly since the "civilized behaviour" metaphor became just about the most potent PR strategy in depicting what was for some, Iraq's demagoguery manifested by its occupation of Kuwait, and the extent to which "allied" forces inflicting damage on the state of Iraq.

Lesley (1976) observes further that "the explosion of communications led to an implosion of the once vast and remote world. Suddenly, it is all there to see, to experience, to judge; a person's scope of awareness and judgement has been multiplied thousands of times" (ibid). We need not elaborate on the above as the electronic world in which we live today, not comparable to what obtained in 1976 attests to the cogent observation albeit visionary statements by Lesley.

What all of the above seeks to do is to portray the context and position of public relations in the universe of actions and events that impact upon various groups in various places, and that constitute a complex public(s) which increasingly asserts its right to know. That being the case, it is no wonder that we now refer to public relations as a "management function"; be it in corporations, educational and research institutions, government, health-related organizations, etc. Public relations in our time has assumed a "power" position with corporations and other organizational structures.

The field is definitely one that has a double edge in the sense that it could be the major tool to achieve socially responsible behaviour, but also could be the major means by which demagoguery, fuelling corruption and other abuses of human beings could be carried out. Aronoff and Gaskin (1983) point out the problems faced by multi-national corporations that become campaign targets, accused of "job and capital exportation; selling important scientific,

technological and managerial knowledge; [notably to the former eastern bloc] and overall "exploitation of the less developed countries" (p. 443). It must be noted, however, that the developing world does not benefit from such "sales" or transfer of scientific, technological and managerial knowledge since the multinational corporations invariably protect their "secrets" from their hosts in the South.

Notwithstanding the complex context and position PR finds itself, its basic environment as discussed by Cutlip and Center as early as 1952 still obtains with levels of complexity being added as new scientific and social issues emerge. The fundamental elements of the practice -- the four-step process comprising research, planning and programming; action and communication; and evaluation remain the foundations for a successful PR operation. What has undergone serious changes is the impact on the speed, conciseness and wealth of access the practitioner enjoys in each step of the process mentioned above. This is possible only because of the advances taking place in the information and communication fields, which have opened vistas and opportunities in channelling messages in ways unimaginable in 1952.

The practice also continues to rely heavily on influencing opinions. Thus in our times, huge corporations engage in work such as issues management which require them to keep their finger on the pulse beat of various publics simultaneously. With developments in informatics and telematics, such approaches are facilitated and serve as crucial mechanisms to obtain the information required for decision-making that would impact upon various publics, internal and external to the corporation.

Besides strategies such as issues management, PR continues to focus strongly on its role and function in carrying out media relations, investments

promotion, governmental relations, publicity and image management. As such, the fundamental tools for persuasion and a stress on effective communication strategies remain cornerstones for an efficient and successful operation. Coupled with the above is the major function of information packaging and promotion, targeting appropriate publics on issues germane to their interests as far as their organizations are concerned. In our time all of the above cannot be properly handled without the application of the new and not so new communication and information technologies.

In concluding this section on public relations in our time, one cannot overlook the central position of gathering data on public opinion, as the pre-eminent step in the research process. In order to influence public opinion the organization naturally has to have a fairly comprehensive knowledge about the "opinions" held by the targeted public. To what extent is public opinion positive or negative towards the organization? When determined, what strategies or messages could best be developed to either sustain positive opinion or image of the organization or conversely sway the public's negative opinion or image in favour of the organization? Aronoff and Gaskin (1983) cite a study funded by the Foundation for Public Relations Research in which the significance of research in public relations emerges as an ever important factor. They state:

> The study points out that the term public relations research is descriptive no longer of specific types of research methodology such as content analysis, public opinion polls, or readership surveys. Instead the term as it is now being employed ... refers to any research that may yield data that can be used in planning and evaluating communication efforts. (p. 951)

It stands to reason that with the advances in computer technology and software development, the research realm has extended beyond reaches unimaginable two decades ago. Public Relations in our time has emerged not only as a significant and powerful aspect of decision-making in organizations, contrary to

what Health and Nelson (1980) claim in their publication on issues management, but also as part of management function that relies heavily on the new information technologies to research, plan, execute and evaluate activities carried out by the organization.

The New Information Technologies

Newsome and Scott (1976) used only one paragraph to treat the use of computers in their chapter dealing with "Common Methods and Research". Williams (1989) observed that the existence of various computerized data bases reduces the reliance of people to look at the middleman (as in two-step flow theory) as a major link between a centralized source and receivers of information. As he states," ... the message flow is direct rather than via opinion leaders and the like" (p. 236).

The use presently of the new technologies in communication and information is so overwhelming that politicians in the 1986 United States congressional campaign spent over $14 million on computer hardware and software (Williams 1989). The computer indeed is now central to the success of any major campaign covering a wide variety of audiences. The technology is applied in campaigns to facilitate and "manage scheduling advance and headquarters operations, financing volunteer activity, research, demographic targeting, ... voter lists and mailings" (Williams 1989, p. 259). In resource rich societies both in skilled personnel and capital, the application of computer technology and science is now commonplace. No longer is it exclusively being used by large-scale operations. Small entrepreneurs ranging from the neighbourhood mini-markets to the halls of massive corporations depend on these technologies to facilitate management.

In some small clothing stores in several cities in North America, computer-based cash registers assist in the rapid generation of mailing lists by using the

cash register to enter just the name and zip code of everyone who makes a purchase, as they pay for their merchandise. This cuts down considerably on the costs involved in developing mailing lists prior to the popularization of computer-based machines, and maintains effective dealer/customer relationships.

Public relations in the fund-raising environment utilizes heavily, computer software to handle factors ranging from data base generation to maintenance of files on all involved in fund-raising drives. Besides fund-raisers, environmentalist groups use computer-based strategies to maintain networks across national boundaries that carry out public relations activities on issues such as tree planting, (reforestation) and the protection of endangered species from extinction.

The preponderance of the new technologies perhaps could be seen in what Smith (1980) called the "great telecommunication highways", which he asserts have displaced "transportation highways" in terms of information distribution between nations. He states also that:

> The latest developments in telecommunications make it possible for all the internal mail of major companies, all of the content of radio and television stations, all the material which passes into newspapers, all of the monetary transactions between large organizations and within them, all of the new sensing devices ... to be conducted electronically rather than by normal physical means (p. 111).

The speed dimension of transmission of data between organizations underlies the phenomenal growth in advances in electronically-based information systems. Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) facilitate quick and accurate communication contacts between disparate entities located in various parts of the world, of major international bodies and multi-national corporations. Cellular telephones extend the office place to automobiles. Information related professions benefit from such extensions of what was once restricted to "physical space" by having information at the finger tips and in hand at any given time.

Micro-computers facilitate access, exchange and review between executives of major corporations and institutions regardless of where they are at any given time. Multi-national public relations companies can reach nodes in their global network rapidly by electronic mail. If, for example, a branch office of the PR firm in London does not have detailed information that it requires on the spot, the New York, Paris or Tokyo office could supply the information rapidly by use of electronic mail devices. As we would discuss later, several countries in Africa cannot benefit from such advances simply because they do not have reliable energy and power infrastructures which are minimum requirements for such systems to function.

The earliest applications of the new information technologies in corporate structures started along the lines of automated office systems. This application simplified the secretarial functions in organizations and in some instances complemented the work performed by secretaries. As advances continue to be manifested in the new field, applications expanded to information processing which helped organizations to generate, distribute and store information rapidly. The impact of the technology also led to more effective operations in accounting systems as a result of applying computers to this sector. Refinements in the technology led to the development of integrated data processing, which till date, is important in the area of personnel information, schedules for production and control of inventory. Along the same lines -- advances in the field -- computer applications moved from mere super-calculator mechanisms and data generation to providing management in the relevant and pertinent information needed for planning, control and evaluation (Daniels and Spiker 1987; Williams 1987).

The above advances, of course, led to easier access to these technologies both operationally and in terms of mastering the content that makes for the

functioning of the technology coupled with research and development to improve upon them. Equipment, notably micro-computers are cheaper today and are evident in all major corporations and institutions. The same could not be said, however, for organizations in countries of the South except some nations in Asia -- Singapore, Korea, and Hong Kong (still under British rule). Latin American countries such as Brazil have also been able to develop and apply these new information technologies in bolstering their economies. Williams (1987) lists the following as technologies utilized in organizational communication:

1. Word Processing
2. Electronic Mail
3. Electronic Funds Transfer
4. Management Information System

He also contrasts traditional approaches with the new approach using new technologies. For instance, whereas traditional input devices involved "paper and pencil, dictation, telephone and typewriter", the new approach utilizes "intelligent typewriters, computer terminals, optical character reader, touch sensitive screens, "Mouse", and speech". With regard to storage devices, traditional methods involved "paper, files, microfiche, index cards". The new technologies use "magnetic tape and disk, optical disk, intelligent circuitry" (pp 108-109).

Even though we continue to observe the applications of these technologies in organizations, reduction of their costs in the market does not mean that they readily serve the purposes for which they were designed without hitches. Availability is one thing. The personnel required to handle and manage the technologies is yet another issue. With advances in science and technologies come demands on retraining personnel, investing in high skilled manpower, thus eliminating some of the savings accrued as a result of reduced costs for equipment and software. The organization, corporation, institution or any such

body that wishes to benefit from these technologies would, by necessity, have to make heavy capital investment in both physical and human resources.

Furthermore, complex corporate structures in the field of public relations would have to ascertain that compatibility exists so as to ensure smooth and unimpeded transmission of data from headquarters to branches thousands of miles away. As much of the new technologies facilitate work in the areas of research, planning, communication action and evaluation in public relations, it is also easy to experience serious frustration in transmissions if the software cannot be used at all nodes. Conversions could prove to be difficult and expensive. Planning the implementation of these technologies right down to the size of the cable on the walls of all entities that are to be electronically linked would alleviate frustrations and ensure effective communications. The bottom line is the cost involved.

I have focused mainly on the application of the new technologies within organizational structures because public relations demand and require effective organization and flow of internal and external communication. How would the public relations division in a corporation or even a public relations counselling firm respond to or promote a corporation's image to the public without access to quality internal information? Upon obtaining such "good" and "quality" internal information, the PR unit would then be in a position to articulate a stance based on the particular need or occasion.

The new technologies have also helped to facilitate access by various publics to corporations and organizations even after hours. Development in the telecommunications field have led to increased and multiple uses of the telephone. Audiotext technology allows any individual to call up an organization and receive extremely detailed information on aspects of concern to the caller.

Ability to leave messages on tapes, a widespread capability in the United States, Japan and Europe, create more access for members of the public to have significant input into management's efforts to maintain effective public relations with their various publics.

Teleconferencing and computer-conferencing could link up groups organized by neighbourhoods to institutions that service such publics. Satellites make it possible not only to communicate verbally with differentiated groups but also to have face-to-face contact with the monitor serving as the intermediary. Through such media, the inter-personal communication dimension is not entirely lost, as one could see reactions of individuals involved in the communication encounter. For the public relations unit in a corporation or a fully fledged PR firm, the implications are tremendous: increased and quality interactions between the corporation and its publics, effective ways of "presenting" one's client to a targeted public in the case of a PR firm, just to mention a few.

The implications for the new technologies with regard to their applications in public relations go beyond corporate structures. The technologies are now all pervasive. Inability by nations as a whole to accommodate, handle, maintain and use beneficially these technologies could determine their place in the global system, particularly on issues related to public relations and public affairs. Meyrowitz (1985) in addressing the impact of "electronic media on social behaviour" titled his book No Sense of Place. Such a title brings out the cogency of claims that the technologies are now all pervasive.

One cannot conclude this section without referring to the state of affairs in the South as far as these technologies are concerned. The first point at issue is the capacity of nations in the South to absorb these technologies, even before we start discussing imbalances and other political factors. In the

absence of basic reliable infrastructures -- energy, power, telecommunications apparata, coupled with problems surrounding availability of skilled manpower and guaranteed support (resource-wise) it would be fool-hardy to speculate.

Secondly, in the absence of a firm commitment to information and communication policies particularly in African states we cannot argue from any premise about imbalance, domination by the North and other geopolitical elements. These technologies even though reduced in costs as advances are made, still remain expensive for several countries in the South.

Thirdly, research and development in these technologies have to be firmly embraced by countries in the South particularly with regard to the uses and applications of these technologies in high humidity, dry, and or dusty environments. Besides the costs involved in acquisition, one would have to consider other costs involved in maintaining the equipment so as to protect it from natural environmental hazards. One quick example of an element that would be quite costly is air-conditioning.

Fourthly, even if nations in the south notably in Africa should decide to commit funds and other factors to the development and proliferation of these technologies, it would be crucial for these nations to adopt a multi-sectoral approach. Such an approach would demonstrate and perhaps assist both the public and private sectors in recognizing that the impact would be system-wide -- labour, education (curriculum development), agriculture, health, transportation and other key sectors of their respective societies.

The fifth and final factor to be considered is what an African telecommunications expert sees as "Africa's Trap". Africa cannot afford to fall too far behind yet it lacks what it takes to even be at the periphery (Ghartey 1990). This situation is all the more difficult because there is no easy way out

by opting, for example, to purchase old technology which in the long run would become even more expensive as a result of scarce spare parts. The rate at which advances are occurring in the improvement of these new technologies makes the enterprise one of high obsolescence.

Numerous authors have addressed the above malaise in which countries of the South find themselves with regard to the new technologies (Smith, 1980; Kivikuru and Varis, 1986; Williams, 1989; Williams, 1987) among others. As far as the application of these technologies go, it would remain largely a phenomenon in the North with few exceptions in the South (Brazil, Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong), for a while.

The New Technologies and Public Relations: A Mini Case-Study of Hill and Knowlton

The preceding sections dealt with PR yesterday and today, and examined the applications of the technologies, real and potential in organizational settings. This section will present a very abridged case study of a multinational PR firm that applies the new information systems in carrying out its work.

Hill and Knowlton is a huge and complex entity. The company has approximately sixty offices around the world (17 in the United States). It attained its current size mainly by acquisition, which places a heavy burden on the administration of the organization given its multi-national and multi-cultural make-up. Because of its spread -- Europe, Asia, Americas, Middle East -- operations cut across time zones. When workers are leaving for home in New York, counterparts are still in bed the following morning. Such a situation gives rise to a perfect setting for the application of the new technologies to facilitate communication and coordinate administration.

The corporation utilizes electronic mail extensively to facilitate financial and administrative management communications cutting across various

time zones. In short, different time zones do not impede effective administration.

The area most serviced by the new technologies at Hill and Knowlton is working with account teams. The technologies allow multiple offices to participate in the preparation of client pitches as well as standard account work. Furthermore, account teams worldwide are provided with access to corporate data including:

- company wide case histories
- company wide professional talent bank
- company wide staff biographies
- company wide capabilities presentations
- company wide programs and videos
- internal communications (Hill and Knowlton oriented news)

The system is so structured that all the above data bases are accessible from anywhere in the world with direct access on a twenty four hour basis. The data bases provide Hill and Knowlton offices with information as well as helping to integrate new acquisitions into the corporate family.

According to a company executive, the above functions, particularly integrating new acquisitions, is quite delicate. The data bases generated and required to be used for new acquisitions are what we could refer to as a source for the corporation's "culture" and raison d'être. Thus, the case histories on companies are full-text, requiring all the offices around the world to use the same word processors.

The texts on capabilities are on data bases centralized in New York. Hill and Knowlton stress that the most effective way of making the technologies useful is to ascertain uniformity of equipment, software, etc., across all offices. Such a system allows also for several offices to work together on proposals using the word perfect software. But the most difficult aspect of achieving the utmost from these technologies is manpower training and development; resource support

and constant monitoring. The corporation has what it calls "practice groups" to ascertain smooth operation of these technologies.

Even though a very large multi-national corporation, Hill and Knowlton has not yet all of the manifestations of these technologies in place. They use their electronic mail system for direct communication with clients, which helps substantially in increasing the speed of the editing process which is crucial in all public relations production. The company, however, has not yet developed the capacity to use bulletin boards and has not yet integrated the public databases for electronic mail users (as of August, 1990). The company plans to move into the above areas in the not too distant future.

The above represents a synoptic case study of the applications of the new information systems and technologies in public relations by a multi-national public relations company. No exhaustive treatment of the application for clerical and managerial functions was presented. The focus was on how the technologies facilitate interaction between a public relations firm and its clients on the one hand, and on the other, between its various offices.

The opening paragraph of this paper made reference to the twenty first century. It is evident from what has been presented so far that the twenty first century would be the "linkage" century, whereby the global system will be reduced to one gigantic system of nodes linked up electronically. It is hoped that regions such as Africa and other parts of the South would, by the middle of the next century, become <u>fully</u> linked to the system. The reason for this speculation is simple: public relations in the twenty first century would have a "universe" much larger than the global system referred to above. Explorations into other realms -- space and undersea terrain would give a radically different image of organizational behaviour. Co-operation models would replace competitive models.

Image management would not deal with single organizational structures we now call corporations. Image management would cover its global system, all in efforts to explain to a perplexed global population that would have lost its privacy, and its freedom, why what we could call the ultra supra-national system is behaving the way it does. In efforts to carry out its mandate, the PR groups in the system will acquire and use power -- power of managing a system constantly reviewing itself, given the fantastic information technology applications that would be the norm. The above may sound as a science fiction. But the advances in these technologies, and the eagerness of the world population today to become "one" electronically lend credence to any scenario that projects a globally linked system, striving to maintain "oneness" not necessarily peace, using effective public relations as a means of explaining why questions pertaining to non-system issues are out of context. The PR practitioner in their time would, by necessity have to be a polyglot.

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